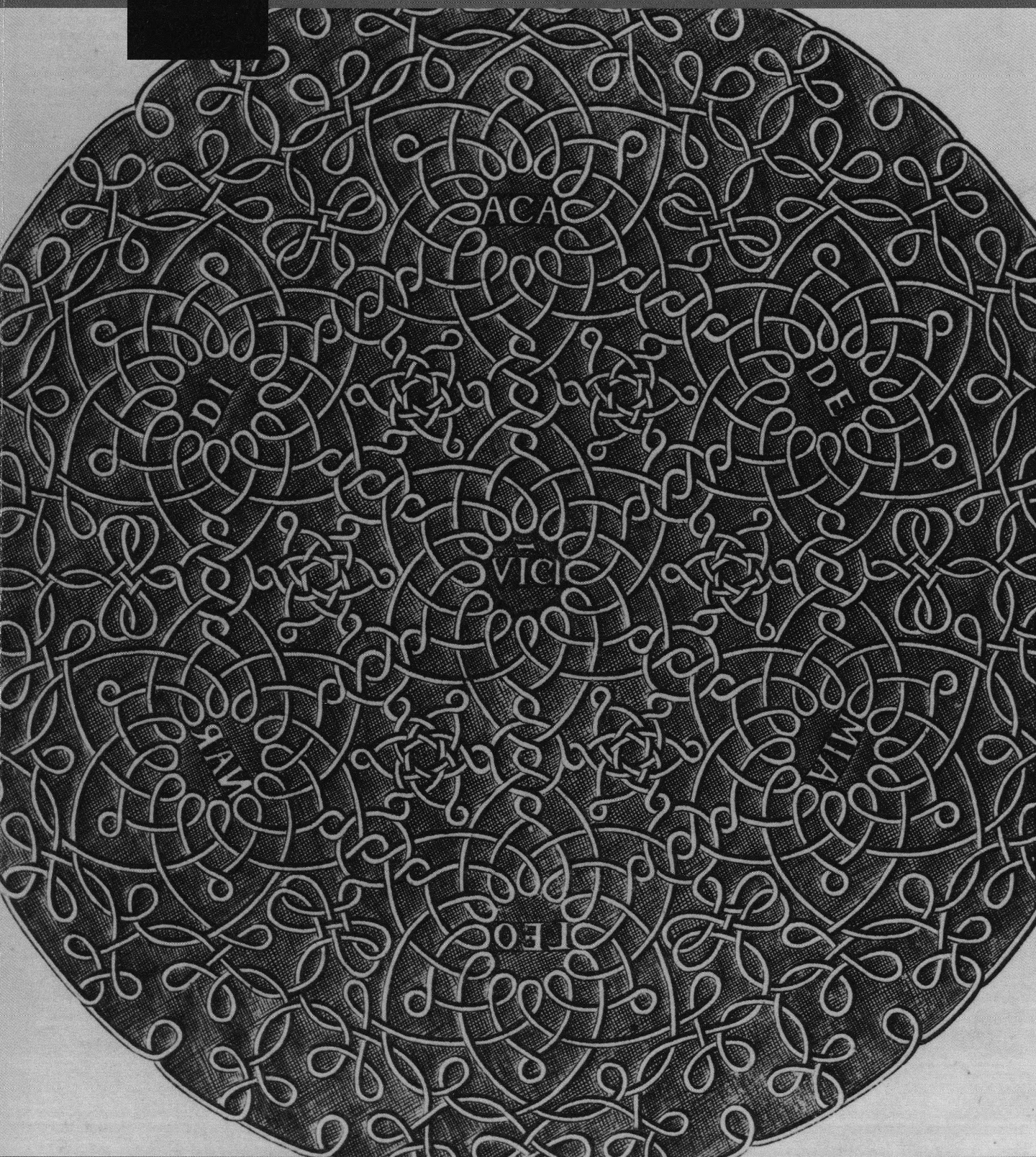


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E X H I B I T I O N N O T E S

The **RISD** Museum

The Object of Ornament:  
European Design, 1480-1800

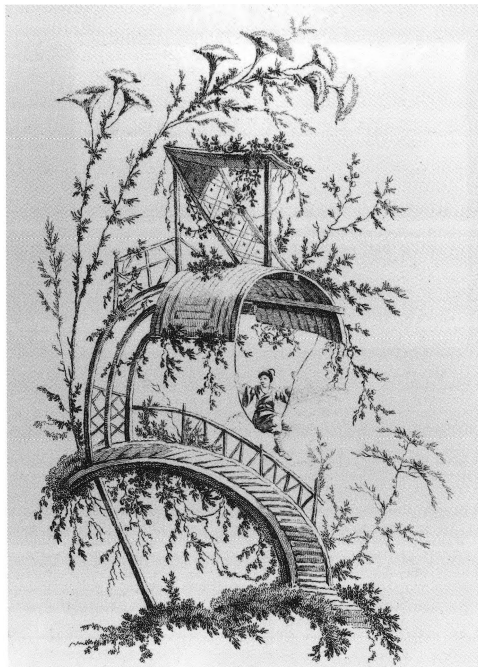


April 12 – July 7, 2002

## The Object of Ornament: European Design, 1480-1800

*This exhibition arose from a collaboration between participants in a Brown University art-history seminar of Fall 2001 and curators from three departments at The RISD Museum: Costume and Textiles; Decorative Arts; and Prints, Drawings, and Photographs. Studying each department's resources in the area of European ornament, the group examined how the work of artisans in materials such as wood, metal, fiber, and ceramics responded to and participated in the inventions of designers who drew patterns for prints. In the exhibition, related ornamented objects are clustered according to the themes of entertaining, study, dress, and food preparation.*

[fig. 1] Jeanne Deny, French, 1749-after 1815, after Jean-Baptiste Pillement, French, 1728-1808, *Scene from "Cahier de six Baraques Chinoises"* ("Folio of Six Chinese Cottages"), 1770, etching, sheet: 13 7/8 x 10 3/8" plate: 9 5/8 x 6 1/2". Museum Works of Art Fund. 50.234.4



[fig. 2] Petitpierre Frères et Cie., manufacturer, French, Nantes, "Panurge in the Isle of Lanterns" *chinoiserie toile* (detail), ca. 1785-90, cotton, plain weave, copperplate printed, 35 1/2 x 33". Gift of Mrs. Constance Wharton Smith. 58.165.54

Highly detailed and finely wrought, ornament prints were widespread throughout Europe during the early modern period (late 15th through 18th century). They took over the role occupied earlier by manuscript patterns and model books, which are usually assumed to have provided plans and decorative designs such as cartouches, grotesques, and garlands that could be used to embellish many products. Even though the prints may have been designs for specific objects, through need or ingenuity, artisans adapted them to a wide range of uses. Because prints are produced in multiple copies, the ideas they carried spread quickly. Printmakers freely copied other artists' prints, adding to the rapid dispersion of motifs. In studying prints together with decorative arts and textiles, it becomes evident that any relatively portable object could disseminate patterns and ideas.

### Hosting and Boasting: Entertaining in Style

Much ornament derived from Eastern sources, which, together with local imitations, particularly captured the attention of the European elite. In their passion for all things "Eastern," Europeans often failed to discriminate between designs from







such diverse cultures as those of Syria and China. Various Eastern decorative elements transmitted to Europe by the silk damasks, velvets, fine wool carpets, and ceramics imported from the Ottoman Empire and China were often translated into locally created extravagant luxury objects: a silver palm-tree incense burner made by an 18th-century Norwegian silversmith or a 17th-century Dutch earthenware plate painted with images of Chinese pagodas.

Jean-Baptiste Pillement (1728-1808), the artist who created the drawing for the print at far left [fig. 1], was considered one of the finest designers of chinoiserie engraving of the rococo period, continuing a rich tradition that included Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721) and François Boucher (1703-70). Pillement's designs appealed to audiences all over Europe. Visualizing the Orient as a whimsical place devoted to luxury and play, he depicted dainty weightless figures balancing on the tips of their toes and whole structures supported by a few twigs. The compactness of the scenes in Pillement's prints allowed them to be easily used to decorate a wide array of objects, from painted chairs to marquetry, porcelain, and textiles. Pillement himself claimed that his work was "*à l'usage des dessinateurs et des peintres*" ("for the use of designers and painters").

Chinoiserie designs, taken from Pillement's fanciful prints or derived from his style, were in much demand during the 18th-century vogue for cotton or linen textiles block- or copperplate-printed with floral or narrative motifs. These were used as expensive wall coverings and bed hangings to achieve a *décor à la chinoise* by French royalty and by other wealthy Europeans. The design of the fabric at left [fig. 2] shows vignettes from a European opera based on exotic themes. Such performances, enormously popular throughout the period, usually involved simple plots with actors dressed in elaborate costumes, thought to be the garb of the elite of the East. The same artists who produced chinoiserie designs and paintings, including Pillement, also worked on the sets and costumes for these operas.

### Learning Curves: Arabesques, Grotesques, and Objects of Study

As global exploration opened new geographic horizons, so too did intellectual horizons widen and education become more important. As schools developed and expanded, literacy began to be expected of upper-class women as well as men. While the wives of merchants and artisans had to know how to keep accounts, the aim of female learning for the upper classes was perceived as personal cultivation. The ostentatiously luxurious yet mechanically practical woman's

[fig. 3] Design attributed to Boas Ulrich, German, Augsburg, 1550-1624, *Woman's writing box*, ca. 1590, probably ebony, silver, brass, moss agate (lid originally mounted with silver figure of Venus, now missing), 10 3/4 x 7 15/16 x 7 15/16". Gift of Leopold Blumka. 48.409

[fig. 4] Virgil Solis, German, 1514-62, *Design with foliage and a female grotesque* from "*Ettlicher gutter Conterfectischer Laubwerk Art*" ("*Various Good Foliage Designs*"), 1553, engraving, 2 1/4 x 3 1/8". Gift of Murray S. Danforth, Jr. 50.322





writing box, ca. 1590, pictured at upper left [fig. 3], is an example of the sort of decorative production that accompanied the new emphasis on women's literacy. The actual writing surface, hidden in the molded base beneath the drop-front of the box, pulls out completely, while the inkwells stored inside can nest in the top of the box. The allegorical figures on the inside front panel suggest a relationship between learning and morality. Justice is flanked on the left by Diana, the champion of chastity, and on the right by Actaeon, who was punished for spying on her as she bathed. Indicative of ambivalent attitudes towards female character and virtue, the medallion on the inside of the box's drop-front shows the blacksmith Vulcan with his consort, the amorous Venus, who cuckolded him.

The box's sinuous silver filigree recalls a form of the popular and versatile *rinçeaux* motif, possibly derived from sources such as the Virgil Solis print of 1553 [fig. 4], but with a history dating back to the scrolling and foliated vines used in antiquity for ornamenting a variety of forms from furniture to architecture. Here, the motif is contained within a fan shape, but that would not have limited the kinds of surfaces to which the design might be applied. Solis (1514-62) regularly borrowed figures and compositions from German and Italian masters, and, in turn, artisans often used his prints as models for object decoration.

Increasingly prosperous clientele demanded printed pictures and texts not only to learn about ideas from antiquity, but also to learn about architecture, design, and ornamentation and to stay abreast of current taste trends. Cheap enough to be owned and used up by artisans, ornament prints also became collectible, which is why they survive in museum holdings today.

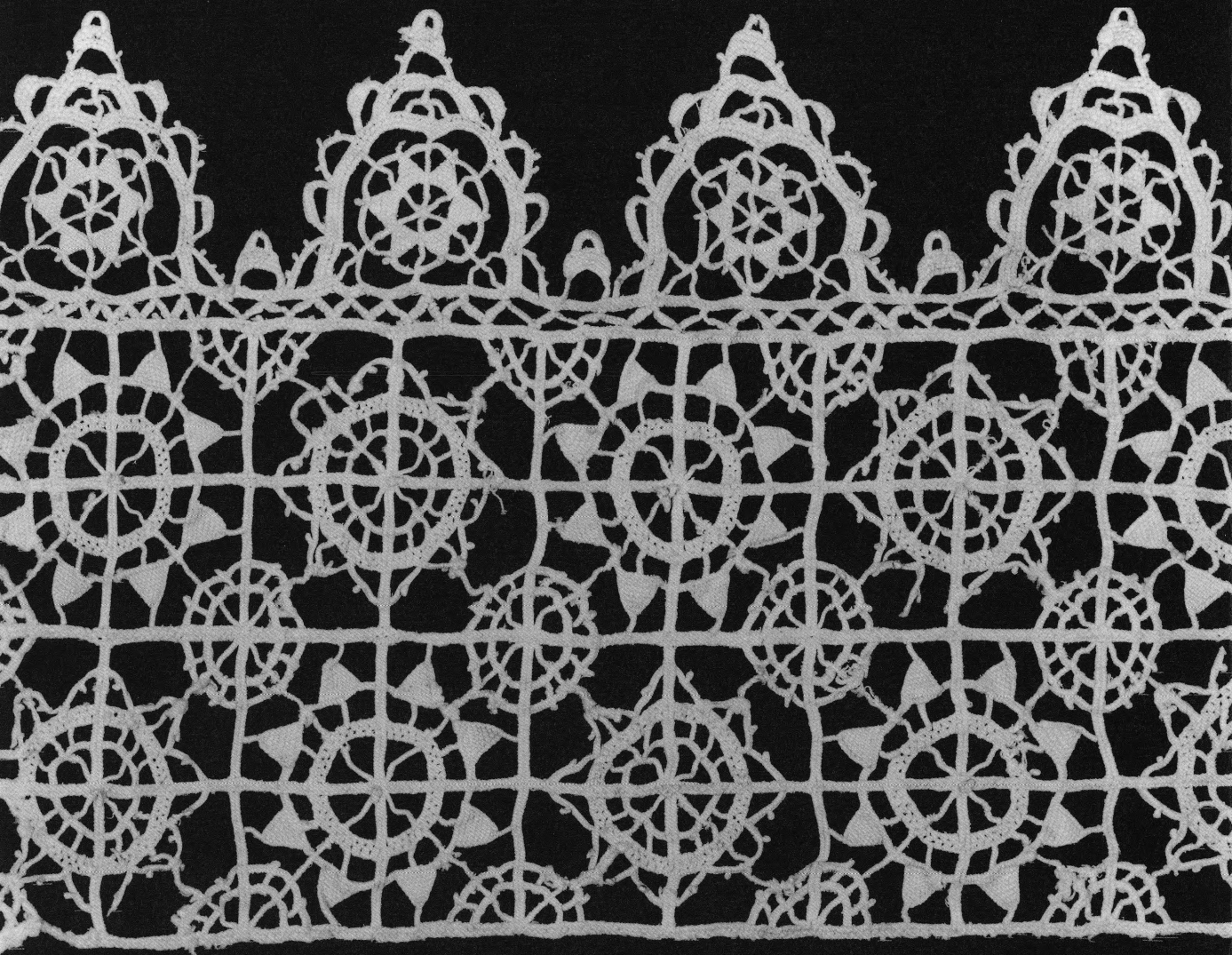


[fig. 5] Marked "CD," probably German, Augsburg, Book cover, 1500-50, silver, silver gilt, niello, 5 1/2 x 3 3/8 x 2". Gift of E. and A. Silberman. 34.016

### Fashioning Identity

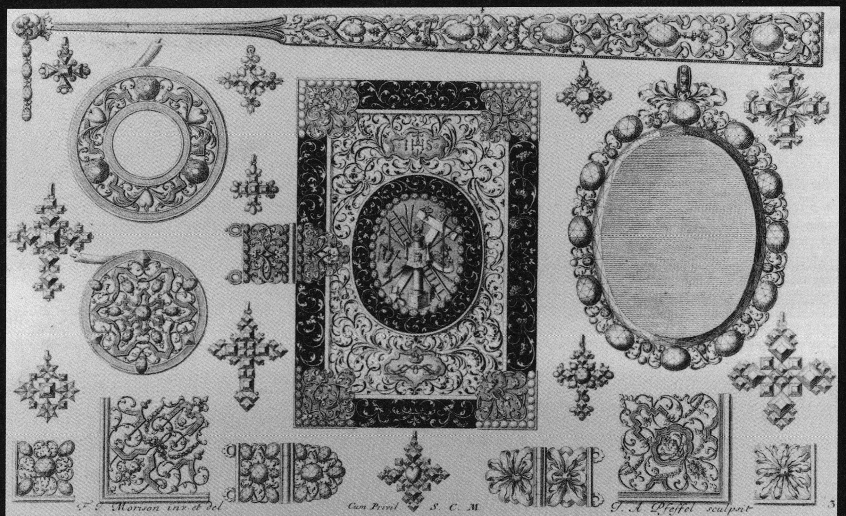
Although one might not have been able to tell a book by its cover, one could certainly tell a cultured lady by her book cover. Because so few people could afford books, or read at all, carrying a book at her waist advertised a woman's wealth, literacy, taste, and training. Intricate decoration, luxury, and intellectual activity unite in the gold-and-silver book cover from the first half of the 16th century [fig. 5]. The medallions and borders on the covers as well as the ridges on the spine are *niello* work. They were made by incising the images of animals, leaves, and wispy feathers into silver, then filling the crevices with a darker metal alloy. The texture of the rest of the cover is filigree, created by cutting silver into thin strips, then winding the strips into vine-like patterns. Similar decoration appears in later prints of design and ornament, such as the one by Johann Andreas Pfeffel (1674-1748) after Friedrich Jakob Morisson (active 1693-97), which provided designs for objects such as book covers and jewelry [fig. 6, next page]. The title page for this series of ornamental prints clearly advertised the upscale international market the publisher had in mind.

As the most mobile form of ornament, the designs and patterns on clothing and accessories were transmitted and transformed as their wearers traveled about. For Europeans, wearing luxurious Chinese silk clothing or Italian copies displayed both wealth and sophistication. After its development in the 16th century, lace also quickly became an important, even indispensable, part of aristocratic attire. Lace denoted luxury, as it

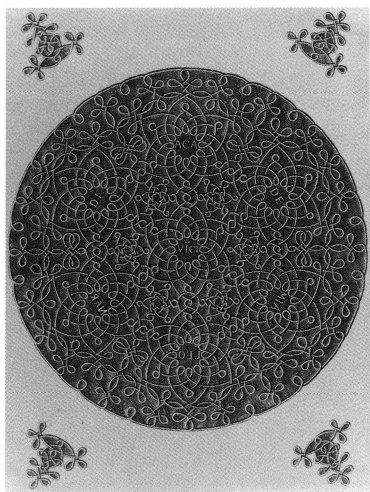


[fig. 7] Italian, *Reticella* (needle lace) fragment, late 16th century, linen, 5 5/8 x 7". Gift of Richard Greenleaf. 48.268

[fig. 6] Johann Andreas Pfeffel, Austrian, 1674-1748, after Friedrich Jakob Morisson (Morison), German, active 1693-97; Design from "*Unterschiedliche Neue Inventionen von Geschmuckh, Zierathen und Galaterien*" ("Various New Inventions of Jewelry, Ornaments and Trinkets"), early 18th century, engraving, 6 1/16 x 6 13/16". Anonymous Gift. 47.772.3







was time-consuming and difficult to make and was restricted to the upper classes by sumptuary laws. Craftsmen made lace professionally for everything from altar cloths to fashionable clothing, but patterns were also available to upper-class amateurs, most often women, who produced simpler edgings for undergarments and bed linens. By the turn of the 17th century, great ruffs, dramatic standing collars, and luxurious cuffs and sleeve ruffles testified to the importance of lace in both men's and women's fashion. The fragment at upper left [fig. 7] is an example of *reticella*, a lace made by removing threads from linen cloth and replacing them with intricate needlework patterns. Early *reticella* has characteristic rosette-like patterns, as here, which relate strongly to the interlace pattern print pictured above [fig. 8].

These interlace designs could also serve an intellectual purpose. This rare engraving [fig. 8], inscribed at the center "ACADEMIA LEONARDI VI[N]CI," is one of a set of six similarly intricate circular patterns attributed to an otherwise unknown "Academy of Leonardo da Vinci," which likely referred to an informal gathering of artists and intellectuals at the court of Milan. To Renaissance theorists, the circle represented natural law and the harmony of the cosmos; therefore, the form of the engraving also reflects the master's treatment of art as a science, worthy of academic inquiry.

### A Feast for the Eyes

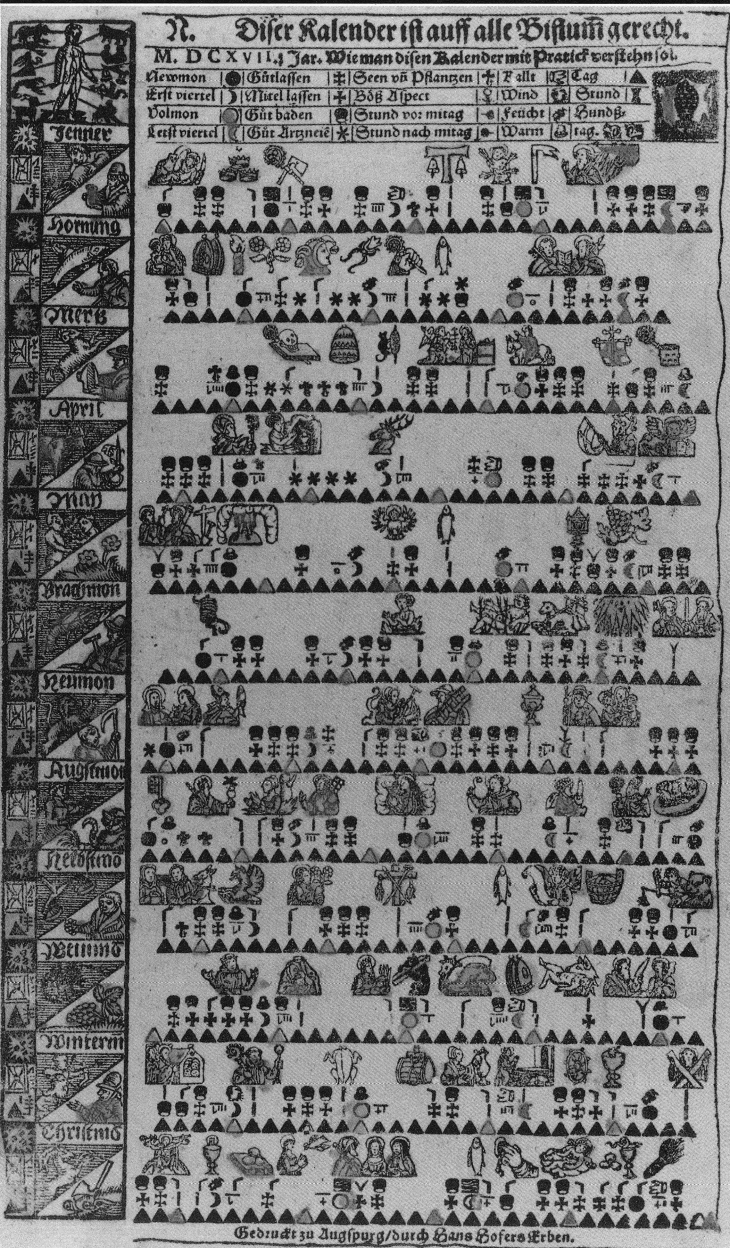
Most objects of everyday life received decorative treatment, including those used for the preparation and consumption of food and medicine. The medicinal uses of herbs depicted in elaborately illustrated texts were a rich source of decoration. Sweets molded in the shape of religious icons or almanacs decorated with images of grape-harvesting demonstrate how Christian festivals metaphorically linked food with the passage of time and religious practice. Decorative prints often referred to the symbolic properties of food, using fruits and vegetables to represent the changing seasons.

Mortars and pestles were basic tools common to all levels of society. For centuries, cooks used these objects to grind spices and pastes, while artists used them to pulverize pigments for paints. They appear in a number of Renaissance depictions of pharmacies along with the stereotypical figure of Pestapepe, the miserable wretch whose job was grinding medicines in the pharmacy. This duty was extremely undesirable because of the caustic nature and foul smell of many of the remedies of the day. The Museum's mortar and pestle [fig. 9], decorated with faces, garlands, birds, and the inscription "Amor Vincit Omnia" ("Love Conquers All"), is significantly smaller and more highly decorated than those seen in paintings of pharmacies. It was probably intended for use in a wealthy household that could afford imported spices, such as pepper from the Moluccas or "Spice Islands."



[fig. 8 and cover]  
Probably Milanese,  
possibly after  
Leonardo da Vinci,  
Italian, 1452-1519,  
*The Sixth Knot*, ca. 1510,  
engraving, sheet: 10 1/2 x  
8"; plate: 10 3/8 x 7  
13/16". Museum Works  
of Art Fund. 47.666

[fig. 9] Italian, *Mortar  
and pestle*, 1680 and 17th  
century, bronze; mortar:  
6 15/16 h. x 8 1/2" diam.;  
pestle: 12" l. Bequest of  
Miss Ellen D. Sharpe.  
54.147.9, 54.147.20



[fig. 10] German, Calendar, 1617, woodcut, hand-colored, sheet: 11 15/16 x 7 1/2" plate: 11 7/16 x 6 3/4". Museum Works of Art Fund. 52.286

The decoration of objects common to all classes, such as calendars, cookbooks, sweets, and tankards, demonstrates how different levels of society came into daily contact with ornament. While wealthy individuals owned elaborate almanacs in book form, merchants and farmers used single-sheet calendars such as the one pictured above [fig. 10]. This hand-colored woodblock print was designed for popular use. Its bright hues would have enlivened homes that may have had little other decoration, and its illustrations helped to mark important days, making it easier to interpret, particularly for those who could not read. Sundays are noted by orange triangles, while major Christian feast days are marked by images of relevant saints or other symbols. For example, the

three crowns on the first line symbolize Epiphany, while on the fifth line the pair of feet disappearing into clouds represents the Ascension of Christ. The calendar also marks the moon's cycles and recommends good days for planting. On the left side of the sheet, images illustrating appropriate activities for each month accompany the names of the months themselves. Good and fair days to bleed someone, take medicine, and bathe are also indicated. Useful, colorful, and lively, the calendar was an object with widespread appeal and would have been welcome in almost any household.

Possession of richly decorated utilitarian objects indicated culture and status. Silk embroidery on a linen cloth, a silver strapwork frame enclosing a portrait, or minutely engraved filigree on a knife distinguished one class from another in a time of increasing social mobility. A profusion of ornament in daily life (or the plain and dreary lack of it) advertised social values and publicly demonstrated taste, education, and experience, as well as wealth. Ornament literally shaped the patterns of European life and identity during the slow change from a subsistence to a consumer economy. The object of ornament became, in fact, the production of ever more hybrid, luxurious, and imaginative versions of itself.

Participants in the Object of Ornament project are Professor Evelyn Lincoln, Department of the History of Art and Architecture, Brown University; Curators Susan Hay, Jan Howard, Thomas Michie, Clare Rogan, Madelyn Shaw, and Jayne Stokes, The RISD Museum; and Brown University students Meg Kilroy and Alison Strauber, who continued working on the project as Museum interns, and Eva Allan, Kimberlie Birks, Robert Brooker, Colleen Burke, Geraldine DePuy, Amory Donnelly, Anna Goldman, Alexis Goodin, Carolyn Gouse, Liwen Ho, Forest Huls, Minji Kim, Jilian Odland, Mollie Parsons, Mariah Proctor-Tiffany, Anne Reilly, Ann Sulzberger, and Jenna Wainwright.

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